

# BROMELIANA

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## BENEVOLENT BROMELIADS

by Racine Foster

(This is the first part of an article by Racine Foster that appeared in the May to November, 1952 BSI journals, then called The Bromeliad Bulletin. The other parts will be reprinted in later issues of BROMELIANA.)

In our boundless enthusiasm for bromeliads concerning their decorative and horticultural aspects we bromel fans are apt to forget the more practical and useful side of this versatile family.

Since man is quite susceptible to anything gastronomical let us consider some edible bromels, most famous of which, of course, is the pineapple *Ananas comosus*. We need hardly be reminded of the extensive use of this delicious fruit with its innumerable varieties, some weighing twelve to fifteen pounds; there are wild species, some so small that they weigh but a few ounces. Their fruits may be tender, stringy, hard as a nut, sweet or sour. All make interesting species, but only *A. comosus* has been commercialized because its varieties suit our selective palates best.

We are finding that the pineapple can serve man in other ways than food.. From this glorious fruit has come, in recent date, an extracted substance appropriately called "Bromelain", effectively used as a diuretic or purgative on intestinal parasites. Conrad F. Asenjo suggests in his paper (in the Journal of the American



*Bromelia pinguin*, photo M. Turner fcbs



*Bromelia pinguin*, fruit. Photo from fcbs

Pharmaceutical Association) that fresh juice of the pineapple could effectively be used as an antihelminthic (vermifuge) in Brazil and India whose native population is burdened with intestinal parasites. This contribution to medical science from the common pineapple adds prestige as well as utilitarian possibilities to this family.

This discovery is not too surprising since the native population of the West Indies has already considered fresh pineapple pulp as well as juice from the seeds of *Bromelia pinguin* as a vermifuge. Senor J.P. Carabia in his "Las Bromeliaceas de Cuba" says that the juice of fruits of *B. pinguin* has been used with success as a vermifuge in Cuba.

In Puerto Rico the young inflorescence of *Bromelia pinguin* is eaten as a vegetable; it is of good flavor and quality, prepared in various ways.

My husband (Mulford Foster) found that in Bolivia and Argentina *Tillandsia maxima*, a very large species, and *Tillandsia rubella*, are used as fresh vegetables eaten cooked or raw as we eat celery. The local name for both is

**NEXT MEETING** - Tuesday, December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2011 at 6:00 P.M. **at the home of Michael Riley and Francisco Correal, 101 West 104<sup>th</sup> Street nr. Amsterdam Avenue** (Take the 7<sup>th</sup> Ave. #1 train or the Independent A, B, or C trains to 103<sup>rd</sup> St.)

**HOLIDAY PARTY!** - Due to space limitations our traditional end of the year party is open only to members and their spouses or significant others. Michael and Francisco will provide the main courses; please rsvp them at 212-666-2395 if you plan to attend. AND let him know if you will bring a side dish, salad, fruit or dessert. If you haven't seen Michael's fabulous collection of bromeliads, orchids, aroids, gesneriads, ferns, etc. growing epiphytically on his living room walls, you are in for a treat.

“Horka”. The tasty, tender hearts of these bromeliads is similar to and a rival of, the palm hearts so choice a food in South and Central America.

*Puya hamata*, living on the high paramo areas of southern Ecuador, is the source of a sweet drink, “jugo de aguaronge” which is extracted from the tender leaf bases which form the heart that later develops into the flower head. Just before it appears the center is dug out and a sweet juice collects in the cup thus formed, very much as the *pulque* is collected from the Agaves in Mexico. Also the tender leaves of this *Puya* are eaten as a cooked vegetable.

The Arahua Indians of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Maria eat the tender heart and leaves of a *Puya* which is called “Besa”. They not only gather it wild but also cultivate it in their gardens.

In remarks about bromeliads which he collected in Ecuador Dr. W. H. Camp (Memoirs of the New York Botanical Garden, Vol. 8 No 1) says that *Puya gummifera*, found south of Cuenca, is eaten by the common people in the belief it is good for the kidneys. It is fed to domestic animals.

In this same paper Dr. Camp has noted that the roots of *Pitcairnia pungens* found on the western encampment of Chimborazo, are ground up and cooked for use as a diuretic.

In northern Brazil,, leaves from *Bromelia laciniosa*, natively called “Macambira” are boiled for extracting a starchy substance which when dried is used as farinha, a widely used flour very rich in calcium. (And it is also a source of fiber.)

Undoubtedly there are numerous other bromeliads used as food or medicine among the natives of Latin America,



*Puya hamata* in habitat. Dennis Cathcart poses behind plant. Photo by Wally Berg from fcbs

and it is hoped they will come to our attention in further study.

*Tillandsia usneoides* has a dual role in service to mankind, primarily as a fiber(which will be discussed later under that heading), but also as the little know possible use of this plant in surgery.

Here and their in the West Indies we have heard that this tillandsia has been used to make a styptic ointment for the

purpose of stopping bleeding. The chief styptics are alum, tannic acid and salts of minerals, and, undoubtedly, tillandsias contain some of these properties in their fuzzy leaves. This native use has been more scientifically applied.

In the February 9, 1944 “Staff Meetings of the Mayo Clinic”, which Dr. C. W. Mays was kind enough to send us, we learned that the absorptive qualities of Spanish Moss for use in surgical dressings had been investigated with interesting results. “. . . the dried moss will retain its absorptive power better than a substance like cotton, as the liquid taken up is stored chiefly inside the leaves and cells, instead of being merely held between adjoining strands.” “. . . Florida moss will take up from six to ten times its dry weight of water.”

Although the availability of cotton has not made it necessary to use the Florida moss as surgical dressing,

it was in the view of possible supply blockades in time of war that this investigation was made.

Among useful bromeliads we find yet another service rendered, that from *Aechmea bromelifolia* (at one time called *Billbergia tinctoria*) a dye was successfully made and used by the West Indian natives. This dye was made from the yellow fluid which is extracted when the main stem of the plant is crushed. (To be cont’.)



*Aechmea bromelifolia*



*Aechmea bromelifolia* inflor.

## THE ROVING REPORTER

by Derek Butcher

(I reprint excerpts from Derek Butcher's Roving Reporter notes that appear regularly in the BROMELIAD GAZETTE, newsletter of the Bromeliad Society of South Australia which is based in Adelaide. These selections resonated with my experiences and thoughts about growing a large collection of broms and trying to cut it down to a size that can be managed more easily with my reduced levels of energy. The notes on plant names will surely resonate with many of our members. Ed.)

### From the Roving Reporter Jan 2011.

Yes, it is still I but I'll be vacating the Secretary's desk pretty soon. We'll still take notes while the talks are on, or should I say that Margaret would do so because my notes are getting so bad I cannot read them myself. To think that this will be another job that the new secretary will not have to do.

In recent months there have been certain changes to our collection, the plants still grow and offset but we are getting slower in our husbandry. *(Editor's note - Uncle Derek's use of the word "husbandry" in connection with caring for plants will likely sound strange to American readers. I'm reminded of Tom Lehrer's witticism about the man who practiced animal husbandry - until they caught him at it..)*

We have found that the pink flowered Oxalis really loves pot culture and despite our extracting the thousands of bulbils we have found it useless to try to rejuvenate potting mix. These bulbils are so similar to fertilizer pellets that my eyes have given up trying to tell them apart. So we now use pristine potting mix and offsets! That was decision number one.

Decision number 2 saw us looking at overloaded leaning benches and overhead structures. Gone are the days when Harry Bamford who lived a couple of blocks away knew it was morning tea time because he heard the saw starting up for new construction work. Nowadays I find that wire does almost as good a job.

Anyway we had to drastically reduce numbers and here Margaret has even allowed me into the potted plant area. In the 'old' days we always kept two of the same just in case one died and kept spares for sale. AND we remembered what we had. Slowly we started to get duplicate duplicates and even triplicate duplicates at various points around the garden. Nowadays we only keep one of each sort and Margaret follows me around with pad and pen doing an inventory. We even found plants we had forgotten we still had. Now the work is finished we can enjoy fewer, but more easy to manage, plants.

We must remember that there are so many Bromeliads that look alike (even when they have different names!) and you must be selective. I know it is easy when you first get into Bromeliads in taking off as many offsets as you can to increase your collection but then you soon have a collection of sameness where variety is the spice of life! If you do not have the right light conditions you will quickly learn that your Bromeliads will grow very well as green plants looking like ferns. This may satisfy some but I think the challenge comes when the right amount of light is rewarded by a brightly coloured leafed plant with the flowers an extra bonus.

One way to cheaply add variety to your collection is by careful selection at raffle time. I have always been critical of those who bring in un-named plants which I suppose is better than wrongly named plants but we often see plants brought in that have been grown with the ferns. The problem here is that there sometimes is good material – it is just bad presentation. The optimist in me says that the recipient can resurrect such a plant to its proper glory by judicious pruning or even waiting for a good offset. To my mind, your greatest warm fuzzy feeling is when you get flowering on a plant that is colourful and sturdy. Remember, just one, - not 10 of the same.

From the Roving Reporter Feb 2011.

Overheard in the car park, "What I like about this club is that there are no politics!" or words to that effect but which got me thinking. By politics I read person versus person without the common denominator of plant.

We still have our spats but our aim for many years has been plants and people. From a personal point of view, the problem with plants is that it needs people so you can talk about plants which is why you may think I am way up in the clouds and deaf as a post – I am conversing with nature. Margaret on the other hand is a people/plant person but perhaps that is a female trait. Whatever way it is you cannot argue with a plant. If it loses the argument it just dies – quietly!



**Roving Reporter July 2011:**

Now to all things technical. Adam mentioned this word when we discussed the Cryptanthus Journal and Len mentioned this when talking Pitcairnioideae to the mob at the World Bromeliad conference in New Orleans.

Technical is a term used when the listener thinks it is all too hard (like mobile phones to the ancient!) and that they will not understand. When you are not learning you may as well fall of the proverbial twig as a Tillandsia may do. Learning should be FUN! Bob Whisson confided in me that he didn't like words ending in *ioideae* either and was getting confused. All I could say was that plants are sorted according to levels of similarity. You know the level if they have the same ending however cumbersome it may be!

To appease him I related the story of our beloved Len Cork who also hated Latinised names. Instead of the plant name he wrote the name phonetically and even he had problems reading what he had written let alone the rest of us. Perhaps he was inspired by Victoria Padilla who did the same thing in her book in 1973 which is OK if everyone spoke Yank!

The good news is that Bob rang me on the Monday morning saying he been on the internet, looking at the problem from different angles and was now fairly happy with the concept. He is now waiting for the next puzzle we can throw at him! On the same vein Jason Grant asked me how I would pronounce his new genus Werauhia and I said, "Not like a Swiss/ Alaskan!" but like a German making sure I had guttural sounding 'rauh'. You may have noticed that Len had a different pronunciation but most of us could understand what he was talking about.

... when I state that I have told thousands of people about the rootless bromeliad, *Tillandsia usneoides*, I have little more than related what I had already read in botanical records regarding this plant. In other words it is always easier to take the other fellow's words and repeat them without



*Tillandsia usneoides* seedling with root. Photo by Greg Gauss from fcbs.

bothering about any personal investigation.

And so, one of the most cherished beliefs of the entire bromeliad world - the weird Spanish Moss with "roots absent"- was shattered. *Tillandsia usneoides* DOES HAVE ROOTS in its early stages just as every other member of the remarkable bromeliad family has, although the roots dry up and are not necessary for it in its later years. □

## N E W S and N O T E S

**WE WILL NOT MEET IN JANUARY AND FEBRUARY** to avoid a repeat of very low attendance due to anticipated nasty weather as we had last winter. **THE WORLD BROMELIAD CONFERENCE** will take place September 24<sup>th</sup> to October 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011 in Orlando, Florida at the Caribe Royal Hotel. You will save \$15 if you register before March 1<sup>st</sup>. Registration forms can be downloaded at [www.bsi.org](http://www.bsi.org).

There will be tours of the collections of leading growers, a judged bromeliad show, plant sales from many vendors, a rare plant auction, a Saturday night banquet and a chance to meet and speak with growers from the U.S. and countries around the world from as far as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Brazil etc.

**2012 DUES** will be due and payable at the end of this month. Single and joint memberships are now \$25.00; the domestic subscription rate for BROMELIANA is still \$8.00 and an overseas subscription is \$12.00.

Please mail your check payable to N.Y. Bromeliad Society to Barbara Lagow, 54 West 74th Street N.Y.C. 10023 or pay your dues at the Holiday Party on December 20<sup>th</sup>.

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